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AMERICAN PRINTING
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

March, 1911 Ladies Home Journal
V.28 No5 HV1643 W copy 1

What One Woman Has Done

By Theresa Hunt Wolcott

INTO the office of a woman—busy as only a woman could be who had undertaken the task of making the world a little bit happier—there was carried one day a blind baby. The arms that opened to receive her were those of Cynthia Westover Alden, a newspaper writer, who was at that time—six years ago—even as she is now, blazing a cheerful path through this world to let sunshine into the lives of those whose roads led through the gloomy thickets of need or trouble.

"What is best to do for this baby?" was the first question, and the answer naturally was: "She must be put in a home for the blind." Much telephoning revealed the startling fact that in all the big city of New York, with its great charities, there was no place for this child, because she was not yet eight years old. There were places for seeing babies, sick babies, crippled babies, feeble-minded babies; for cats and dogs, birds—in fact, animals of all kinds—but no one had yet thought of providing a place for a blind baby. No hospital would keep her, no nursery accept her—every application Mrs. Alden made in her behalf was refused. Indeed, further inquiry some time later developed the fact that there was no place in the United States that would take a blind baby except two nurseries, and they were private institutions.

"Never run away, Cynthia, because a thing is hard to do," was the advice Mrs. Alden's father had given her when she left him to make her way alone in life. "Be a good soldier. Stand your ground and do your duty, no matter what the world may say, and I shall always be proud of my daughter."

SO THE International Sunshine Branch for the Blind was formed. A flat of three rooms was secured at three dollars a week, and, all unconsciously, the first public institution for blind babies was started.

One day word came to Mrs. Alden that there was a blind child in a Mission on the East Side. She asked the city authorities to give her the custody of the child, although she knew of its dreadful physical condition. The response to her request came in a long string of oaths from one of the officials, denouncing her in particular and all women in general for introducing fads that interfered with the city rulings.

Mrs. Alden remained calm and seemingly unmoved, though his swearing grew worse and worse with each sentence he uttered. Finally he stopped for breath and looked wonderingly at her. She leaned toward him and remarked: "I was brought up in the mines of Colorado. There is one swear word you have not used. I could give it to you if you would like to have it." He gave a nervous laugh. "Do you really mean it?" he said. "Will you take a child like that who must have hospital care to begin with?"

"That is what I came for," she replied.

"Well, it's the first time we have had anything like this happen, and if you have got the courage you have got the sympathy and help of every one of us here too. I thought you were a faddist, and would back out when the real work came."

The child—today beautifully developed physically and mentally—is the larger one, on Mrs. Alden's left, in the picture. The other little girl is a Greek taken, when a baby, from the city department for the feeble-minded. In her studies she is now advanced far ahead of other children of her age.

Mrs. Alden and Her Chums

THE next step was the incorporation of the International Sunshine Branch for the Blind, "for the care, maintenance and education of blind children."

On investigation it was learned that the blind babies of the very poor were sent to Randall's Island, the county poorhouses, and put in with the feeble-minded, as there was no other provision nor classification for them. Mrs. Alden borrowed six of them for six months. A graduate nurse, accustomed to working among the blind, devoted her time and energy to them without financial recompense, and the changes in the children were marked. They were called back to the Island and Mrs. Alden realized that unless something radical were done all their work would be for naught. She went down to the Mayor's office, and his clerk told her three times that it was a busy day and that she had better come some other time. What was her business anyway?

"Well," she remarked, "I have six blind babies outside. I am going to hit them on the head with a sledge-hammer and drop them over the Brooklyn Bridge, and I want to see if the Mayor will stand by me."

"What!" gasped the clerk. He took long strides into the inner office, and, before Mrs. Alden had really time to wonder what would happen next, the Mayor stood before her.

"What's this! What's this!" he exclaimed. Mrs. Alden repeated her startling statement.

"Oh, Mr. Mayor!" cried Mrs. Alden, "I want to put them out of their misery with one grand blow. You, as Chief Magistrate of the city, allow them to die by inches. The light-hunger is so great that instead of sucking the thumb like a seeing baby the fingers of a blind baby dig and poke for the light that never comes, until the eyes are injured and the baby dies of blood poison or lives to the worse fate of imbecility because it is misunderstood and neglected."

The Mayor assured Mrs. Alden that he had never heard of a blind baby; that she could depend upon him to help her bring about some provision for their care. This promise he remembered when—four years afterward—he signed the bill appropriating funds for the care of the dependent blind babies.

Experienced workers with the adult blind advised Mrs. Alden to leave the children with their mothers until they could go to the schools for the blind. Many of the children had no mothers, and the mothers of the children of the very poor had to leave them all day while they worked. When a blind child is neglected eight years—the age when it may be admitted to the City School for the Blind—it is undeveloped mentally and is not eligible, and no amount of care can ever make up for that lost time. The children of the poor, therefore, are really feeble-minded because of neglect. The brains of blind children are normal at birth, and deteriorate only because of lack of development. It is light that makes us hold up our heads. These children, untrained, never lift their faces. They shrink, huddle in corners where they can feel the walls, stoop, and never reach out nor stand until they are taught and given confidence.

IT WAS a fight from the very beginning to make the world understand that this work was no woman's fad, but the discovery of a new and beautiful charity.

A suitable combined home, nursery, hospital and kindergarten for the children and a law for their maintenance were Mrs. Alden's aims. She contends that a blind child should have special care from the minute it is blinded; and as it grows to kindergarten age it must be educated. An appeal was next made to the Board of Education to have the Home made a public kindergarten, a school where the teacher would come to the children, a school to which little blind children could come whether their parents were rich or poor; for the blind children of the well-to-do need special care just the same as the children of the poor. To establish this school was not easy. Her application was refused repeatedly.

There was no law that deprived a child of an education because it was blind. Still, the Board of Education looked upon Mrs. Alden's request as a fad, for the members had never seen a blind baby. She invited the members to the little Home where she met all the requirements that would constitute a public kindergarten. True, these first children were the ones that the city had thrown away as not worth saving, but the children were there, and they were not feeble-minded. Then why should they not be educated as seeing children? The little family grew, the Home was visited, and the school is now a public one.

From house to house they moved until finally the beautiful Home shown on this page, in Dyker Heights, Brooklyn, was secured. The bill was pending which would provide for these children, but the property was heavily mortgaged and unpaid house bills stared Mrs. Alden in the face. Though she had received every possible courtesy at the hands of the city officials, once they understood the need—and they stretched to the utmost every point of law for her to meet the needs of these babies—the expense of running the Home was $500 a month. How was she going to hold out? There was no income except as she appealed for it privately and through the press. Then came the moment of temptation.

It took more than ordinary courage to decline an offered salary of $5200 a year, rather than give up the fight she was making to save these blind babies. She saw that she could not do her journalistic work and look after these children too. "Why not give it all up and let them go back to the Island?" she thought. "I can't make the world understand that it is doing everything else but taking care of the most helpless of all human beings—blind babies!" She was at her desk at home, and ready to sign the letter that would close the Home and allow her to continue her work as a journalist, when merry voices and the patter of feet were heard outside. Six of the children bounded into the room and tried to hug her at once. The nurse had brought them over, for the first time, to visit her. That settled it. Mrs. Alden crumpled the sheet of paper in her hand and slid it into the waste-basket. She says it was the nearest she ever came to showing the white feather, and all because she was tired.

IN ORDER to establish the institution Mrs. Alden raised almost $100,000, but as she had no other interest at heart than the good of those children she won her cause. The law went through at Albany without one opposing vote. It provides for the maintenance of blind children in the International Sunshine Home for the Blind at the rate of a dollar a day. She hopes that such a law may be passed in every State in the Union.

The Arthur Sunshine Home shown in the picture is the result, again, of Mrs. Alden's far-seeing vision. When the children are graduated from the Blind Babies' Home they may be placed in the New York institution for the older blind, or sent to the public schools which have been opened to them since Mrs. Alden began agitating the need of their education. It was to provide a permanent home for the orphan blind children that she undertook the work of establishing this second institution. New Jersey now has a law committing the New Jersey blind babies to this Home—it being at Summit, in that State—at the rate of $330 a year for each child.

Mrs. Alden always bends her energies in the direction of needs that nobody else seems inclined to recognize. It is beyond the comprehension of many of the workers in organized charities how any woman would give all of her time, money and self to a cause from which she receives nothing in return but a great happiness in the service of those whom she can befriend and help.

As one said who valued her untiring efforts, "What your work calls for, Mrs. Alden, is not congratulations, but blessings!"

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The Secret Society of Mothers

In Which a Mother of Eight Children Chats With Other Mothers

By Charlotte Reeve Conover

I AM a great believer in the drama as a source of education—not only the drama of the theater but especially the home-made variety. If scraping away out of a book of "Selections" makes Tom and Amy wild over the perfection of a full orchestra, then also will the attempt to render a part in a play give them a fuller appreciation of dramatic art. There is nothing so old and so universal as the instinct for stage representation. It goes back into the dawn of history. We may deplore the faults of the theater, but the theater itself is a good thing and is going to last as long as human nature does. Our duty, since we can't abolish it, is to reform it. The great engine is the public taste. Improve that and you improve the theater. And public taste begins in the nursery. All this is part of the reason why my family is in the habit of giving a play in the attic during Easter vacation. I say "a part" of the reason. The other part is just as cogent: it is because we all think it is great fun.

JUST after the holidays are over the children begin to decide upon their Easter play. Sometimes it is a selection; sometimes an adaptation; sometimes original. I allow full discretion and only interfere when quarreling begins. Of course they quarrel: don't grown people's theatrical clubs always quarrel? It's a regular part of the performance, human nature being much the same at fifteen or at thirty.

Gillett is general stage manager and his regulations go. In allowing this arrangement I had a double purpose. There must be some head to any concern that succeeds. The first lesson a boy ought to learn is how to obey orders, and the second how to give them. Many a man has failed in business because he did not know how to manage the people under him. And just because I have seen more than one hint of dictatorialness in Gillett is the reason I have put him at the head of the company. The other children have a very just idea of their obligations to the older brother, but if he presumes upon it, is unjust, impatient or unreasonable, they are quick to know and resent it. If there is too much insubordination on one side and discipline on the other the play stops at my orders. Then they are all sorry and wish they hadn't.

As long as things go smoothly I do not interfere, but remain an inoffensive supernumerary and tiring-woman. I drill them in their parts; I make gilt-paper crowns and paint red heels on slippers: I cut Tuscan slashed doublets out of an old raincoat and lace sleeve ruffles out of an abandoned sash curtain. I make up Amy's cheeks with rouge and adorn Tom with a fierce mustache. The latter is our chief mechanician, and will, after a while, wire the stage for electricity. I saw him reading up on it in "Harper's Electricity Book for Boys." Sometimes the stage traps won't work, or the trees in Birnam Wood refuse to stand upright, and then the boys must call in their father to help.

AN OLD trunk in a corner of the attic holds the entire wardrobe and other "properties" of the Foster Theatrical Company. Among other things are a velvet skirt that Amy plays Diana Vernon in, and a shiny chintz curtain covered with pink roses, which, with a lace stomacher, pearls and powdered hair, makes a bewitching Marchioness costume. There is also a pair of rapiers made out of umbrella ribs with corncob handles, which Don and Maurice jab at each other in a fencing bout, and, after running each other through in a most bloodthirsty manner, appear before the curtain to bow gracefully. It is a scene which always scares Anne, who has to be led out and pacified. Billy Ames and George Garretson are the burnt-cork artists in association with the principal troupe. They black up and do stunts with shoes too big for them and trousers too small. A fancy dress which has been given to one of the boys looks so much like a matador's costume that if I were to give the least encouragement they would have our cow up in the attic and try a Spanish bullfight.

The home-made costumes are sometimes astonishingly successful and pretty. For instance, when Amy gets herself up as Brunhilde. She puts on a low-necked nightgown, pulling the fullness up around her waist with a belt and letting it hang over. Over this she wears a cuirass made of the hollow pasteboard that comes around large bottles and seems never to lose its curvature. This is shaped after the pictures in the Niebelungen book and covered with silver paper. On her head she wears the dome-shaped cover of my old-fashioned tilting water-pitcher. I allowed her to use it feeling that in no other way would it ever serve a human need; and really it is a stroke of genius, especially when she has two white pigeon wings wired on, and her hair curled and flowing over her bare shoulders. Sandals made from bedroom slipper soles, a large-sized bright tin kettle cover for a shield, and my alpenstock disguised as a spear, make a most striking costume. I saw tears in her father's eyes when he first saw his eldest daughter thus attired. How she gets into it so quickly after having played first mandolin in the overture, "The Prince of Pilsen," is a mystery.

TODAY I am at work upon a wig for Ruth. Her hair is shingled—an impossible arrangement for Juliet! The play is not the original classic but an adaptation by Ruth herself; Maurice is to be Romeo. The older children are busy with some extra work at school, which, as Gillett says, "prevents our coöperation," therefore it is the younger ones who are to entertain the family and neighbors during Easter week this year. There is a stage built in the north side of the attic by the boys during summer vacation. It is quite a triumph of amateur carpentry, betraying only a small slope of the floor the wrong way. The curtain is of red denim, sliding with rings on a pole; the footlights, candles shaded by halved tomato cans. The scenery is home-made because we can't afford expensive accessories. Stage properties, which they cannot borrow from me or from other mothers in the neighborhood, they must contrive themselves or do without. Therefore, Amy has hemmed the curtains, Gillett hung the "flies," Tom stretched the muslin scenery over frames, and all three together have painted it.

At the present moment all three boys are tinkering with a tin moon and disagreeing as to its proper size.

From the front the proscenium arch is a real masterpiece and the company assembled for rehearsal beneath it quite suggestive of the real thing. As Tom and Donald are shoving the flies back and forth to make them run easily Gillett is coaching Ruth on how to faint.

"See here," he says: "here is your chalk mark. Stand right there and when I give the cue sink gracefully into my arms." "That's all very well," says Ruth skeptically, "if you stand square on *your* chalk mark and not miss me like you did before. I don't want all my hair pulled out or my nose put out of joint by your grabbing at anything that comes nearest."

The Foster Theater exists with only two restrictions: the children must not quarrel and they must not let fun interfere with school work. If either happens things come to an abrupt standstill and not one of the company wants that. There has evidently been a little friction over this play, but not enough yet to warrant censorship. Judith is to ring a bell, off stage, in one scene, and her cue is from Donald:

"Hark! I hear a bell ring!"

"Oh, what's the *use!*" he exclaims disgustedly, "if you ring it every single time *after* I've said my lines instead of *before! Can't* you remember? Now let's try again. Now——" and the scene is repeated.

"Hark!" (from Donald, with his eyes rolled up.)

"Hark!!" (as nothing but silence occurs.)

"Hark!!!—you, Judith! Where's that bell? Oh, you're *such* a chump!"

Their father suggests that the lines should be changed to read "Hark! I hear a bell about to ring!" but that does not meet with approval.

AS I FINISH tacking the last long strand of tow on to the bobbinet wig foundation the company appears from school, out of breath but full of enthusiasm.

"Mother, have you got that wig finished? Oh, that's dandy!"

"Mother, did you put the gilt braid on my trousers?"

"Mother, won't you see what's the matter with this curtain cord? It sticks in the groove."

"Mother!!"

"Yes, yes, yes; don't all ask at once. I've done everything you asked me and more too. Here is some gingerbread Katy sent up because we're going to have late supper tonight and she thought you'd be hungry."

"Bully for Katy!" said the stage chorus.

Donald was at work on a large-lettered placard which was to be tacked at the head of the attic stairs over the box-office. It read:

FOSTER'S THEATER
Presents ROMEO AND JULIET
2d Performance
Admission:
Dress Circle: Adults—10 cents
Children under ten—5 cents. Parquet—2 cents.
Katy free. Uncle James not admitted.

"What's the matter with Uncle James?" I asked, pained at such a sweeping excommunication.

"Oh!" said Donald, "he laughs in the wrong place and we can't have him."

This will be a most serious deprivation, because in spite of his failing Uncle James always comes to the play and evidently (too evidently) enjoys it. He sits on the front seat and holds Anne—whose admission he has paid along with his own—on his lap. I had noticed some such propensity on his part at times when the moon came up by jerks or false noses didn't fit, but I never supposed it would lead to such serious consequences.

We must effect some sort of a compromise between the dignity of the performers and James's unquenchable sense of fun. I hunted up the authoress.

"Ruth," said I, "aren't you going to allow Uncle James to come in? You know how generous he is to all of you."

"Oh, I know, Mother, but he destroys all solemnity. When I am reciting, 'Come, phial; what if this mixture do not work at all?' I can see his shoulders begin to go up and down, and I know that he is going to snort in another minute. He says it's because I had the ipecac bottle out of the medicine-cupboard, but that's not so. And it's awful hard to go on with a love scene if he sits there and snickers. You just try it."

No; I didn't want to try it; I was too sure of the reasonableness of Ruth's objection. Perhaps the compromise could come from the other side.

WHILE I was ruminating upon this Ruth continued: "If he would only laugh where we expect him to laugh it would be all right. There are several places where we mean the audience to laugh, but he laughs all through and he doesn't seem to see the difference."

"Where are those places?" I asked, seeing at last a way of escape for James.

"Well," said Ruth, turning the leaves of her manuscript play, "here, where Malvolio says, 'Ha, villain! I see thee come forth!' you could laugh there because it's proper; but when Romeo says, 'What I want to know is—do you love me?' and she says, 'Yes,' and he says, 'Well, I must go,' there's no sense in bursting out the way Uncle James did last time we gave it, because that's a proposal, and he just spoiled it."

I resolved to make Uncle James acquainted with the particular places where to laugh and where to abstain before the next performance, because I think there could be no deprivation for him or for any of the family quite equal to being debarred from witnessing the annual play of the Foster Dramatic Company.

If I could I would invite the outside members of the Secret Society of Mothers to occupy reserved seats in our attic next Thursday night. They also might offend by laughing in the wrong place, but whether they did or not they would go away feeling that children's theatricals have a real place in the education of a family of boys and girls.

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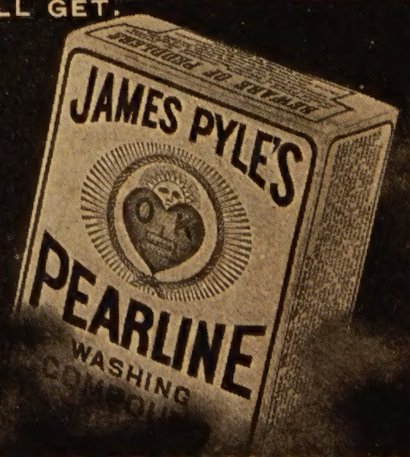

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